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THREE VIEWS ON CINÉMA-VÉRITÉ

COLIN YOUNG

Cinema of Common Sense

The term *cinéma-vérité* has been used, loosely, by critics to label documentary films which employ the technical advantages of the new light cameras and sound recorders, and which usually do not begin with a script but with an actual on-going event which they try to record, or a situation which they attempt to describe, always, allegedly at least, with the minimum of interpretation. In attempting to get at the *truth* of a situation, the preconceived script is disallowed, the film-maker does not *direct* (in the sense of controlling what is in front of the camera), and the editing process is faithful to the actual event—its continuity, its relationships, its entire character. No one, I maintain, really expects to find such a thing as the “*objective statement*,” although some of the new documentary film-makers sometimes permit themselves to talk as if that’s what their films were concerned with. In less polemic moments they will admit to the “*subjectivity*” of their cameras and their editing, but will insist that they are trying, to the limit of their own discretion, to represent the events or situations as they found them—not as they expected to find them, not as they wish you to believe they found them, but as they saw them through the camera.

This, then, could more accurately be called the cinema of common sense, the naturalist cinema—Louis Marcorelles prefers “*direct cinema*,” Drew Associates have dubbed their program “*The Living Camera*.” It can readily be distinguished from the conventional cinema which deals, and revels, in contrivance—the immaculate control which a film-maker can exercise on his material so as to present to an audience his very personal vision of it. In its

traditional forms this has led the director on to the sound stage where by set design, costuming, lighting, and casting he can place in front of his cameras the precise image he seeks to represent, and for the editing he supplies himself with those shots which he can then redirect into the controlled interpretation of the image which will be shown to an audience. Generally speaking, most such controls are abandoned by the c-v director; and he tries, during editing, to be dictated to by his subject, rather than conversely.

This seems familiar—it fits with one possible interpretation of what Robert Flaherty was about (what Frances Flaherty calls nonpreconception). It is also very unfamiliar because it has resulted in some rather startling films—films which do not seem to follow at all the traditional lines of the story film.

In this space I had meant to write a full-scale polemic on behalf of *cinéma-vérité*, but circumstances prevented me from undertaking it now. The polemic is needed, it seems to me, because the new styles in documentary are either being attacked (at least in part through misunderstanding) or ignored (by timorous exhibitors and television bookers). Henry Breitrose asks what is meant by calling a “*Living Camera*” film *interesting* (Leacock and the others at Drew Associates used to say they were merely trying to get on to subjects which were “*interesting*” and present them as faithfully as possible to an audience). He says that the films are usually as good as their subjects are interesting, but that the most successful ones work because their subjects have a structure which permits the “*story*” to unfold “*naturally*.” He concludes that whenever the

meaning of the event is externally evident, and when the event's structure is sufficiently similar to the traditional structure of dramatic conflict, there is a good chance of the film's working.

This seems to me to beg the question—just as Peter Graham does when he implies that all cinema must be judged by the same set of standards—*Potemkin* and *Le Chemin de la Mauvaise Route* equally, even although these standards were arrived at and set down before Herman made a film, before Rouch or Leacock or the Maysles ever held a camera. There was the day when a documentary film-maker argued, at the first Flaherty Seminar in 1954, that a documentary film-maker, if he could not have a set script in his hand, should at least have a strong outline in mind and should see to it that all material shot would relate to that outline and would contribute to the argument of the film. Who said that? Leacock. Seven years later he was saying something else. The cinema had moved forward. The critics want to hold it back.

Nevertheless, Breitrose is justified in keeping some kind of score. Among the Drew Associates films some are vastly more successful than others. *On the Pole* (the story of Eddie Sachs' 1962 race at Indianapolis) is a fascinating document of a man chasing a lunatic ambition. Undoubtedly, this is the most articulate film made by the group. They chose Sachs, firstly because he had the favored position (earned by the driver with the fastest qualifying heat), and secondly because he was a talkative, outgoing man. But the film succeeds because of the film-makers' skill in putting the audience in a position to judge what is being said. Knowing that they could not predict the outcome, they took us inside Sachs' ambition to win and then stayed with him when he lost, forced out of the race by car trouble. It is here, in this early example of "Living Camera," that one myth is quickly destroyed—namely that the presence of the camera interferes with the audience's chances of seeing a person behave naturally. We see Sachs standing disconsolate-

ly by the track, with the race still in progress, a race no longer his. He becomes aware of the camera, tries to pretend he has not seen it, but we become aware of his bluff—we see him putting on an act, we see him gradually becoming resentful of the camera he had earlier accepted and welcomed; and because of this we see more clearly below the surface of a man who lived to win and who lost—precisely because, when Sachs was no longer lost in his own task, the camera became an intrusive element.

It was perhaps remembering this that led Leacock and Gregory Shuker to make a fatal mistake in *Nehru*.^{*} At the outset they had undertaken not to interfere or intrude in any way—except by being there. In return for permission to follow Nehru, they promised to ask no questions and make no demands of any kind. But in editing the film, Leacock has said, they found themselves without any dramatic material, without the usual elements of narrative conflict. They had just faithfully followed and recorded the work of an extraordinary man over a short period. But in looking for some threat to tie together the various parts they concluded that the key was in the promise they had made to Nehru—a promise they had, in the end, broken. Thus, in the film (broadcast May 31 on KHJ-TV, Los Angeles, and like the other "Living Camera" films available for other TV bookings) they keep pointing to this sequence, building it up, and then finishing the film with it. Unfortunately it is a complete fizzle. Shuker asks Nehru a question or two, Nehru answers them, in a perfectly straight conversational tone. Nothing much is said—we learn little new. It is as bad a gimmick as in Gitlin's *The Comedian* in which a perfectly straightforward account of Shelley Berman opening a show in Florida is tricked up by promises of fireworks in the last act—when Berman's act is "ruined" by an off-stage tele-

*As we go to press, Sachs has just been killed in the 1964 race, and headlines announce Nehru's death.

phone ringing. What, left to itself, could have been a savage little moment, is dressed up as melodrama and then flops.

These errors of judgment are a hold-over from the conservative classical drama. They ought to be totally unnecessary. It ought to be enough to spend fifteen days with Nehru (or, more questionably, three of four with Berman), so long as the film-maker is telling us something we did not know before, and probably could not know very readily by any other means. Thus both *Primary* (1960) and *Crisis* (1963) by the "Living Camera" teams did show us a part of politics that went beyond simple screen journalism. In *Primary* we are following the Humphrey-Kennedy battle in Wisconsin. In *Crisis* the subject is the Kennedy-Governor Wallace battle over the token integration of higher education in Alabama. The *New York Times* editorialized against the latter film on the grounds of improper interference with the due processes of government. Crucial to their argument was the contention that Leacock *et al.* could not witness the President, the Attorney-General and others without materially affecting their work and decisions. Again, on the screen, we can tell when Robert Kennedy is putting on an act. It is hard to believe that the act substantially alters what he would have done in the same situation if the cameras had been absent. The great service of the film is that it successfully captures a few moments in the problems of government. By having one crew with the Attorney-General in Washington and another in Alabama the film-makers were able to cover the conflict with a thoroughness which was not really matched at the time by any of the participants. We see Kennedy hesitating over a decision, needing information from Alabama which the cameras have already (in the edited film) shown to us in the audience. The result is to dramatize the complexity of the situation, and to clarify the nature of the crisis and the difficulty in arriving at a correct and tactically appropriate decision. This was editing of a

more traditional sort—juxtaposition to force a certain interpretation—but it was arrived at by the simple device of extending the reportage situation from one location to two.

After *On the Pole*, I find *Football* and *Petey and Johnny* the most interesting of the Drew Associates' films. (I belong to the minority not liking *The Chair*). *Football* exploits a situation of straightforward conflict. Given extroverts in front of the camera a skilled crew cannot miss. But *Petey and Johnny* is a failure—defeated by the dilemma which all *cinéma-vérité* must face up to in the end: how to be faithful to a subject which does *not* fit neatly into the structural patterns of conventional drama, without betraying the audience. Drew chose what he considered the best of two betrayals. He slicked up the situation, concentrated on a gang member's marriage to provide a focus point, wrote narration for the social worker (the film was shot in Harlem), and threw away hours of taped conversation recorded wild on the streets.

The French, and French-Canadians, have different problems. Michel Brault (and Pierre Perrault) walked into a small Quebec fishing village and documented the villagers' decision to take up again the hunt for the white whale that had formerly provided them with their principal source of income. It so happened they caught a whale, and that these men, and their families, had a natural grace and wit which Brault and his recordist Carrière could catch. But there is also a strong "traditional" element to *Pour la Suite du Monde*—the scenes, though not directed, are set and the camera always tries to place the people in their landscape. The film ends up by being as close to Zavattini as to Flaherty and, with a minimum of narration, is a victory for the naturalist cinema. The Brault-Jutra-Carrière film *La Lutte* (on professional wrestling in Montreal) and Wolf Koenig's *Lonely Boy* manage at the same time to be accurate documents of their subjects and (without narration) scathing commentaries on the society which nurtures them.

By comparison, the Ballantine-Shepherd production *The Most* is contrived and rigged, although also enjoyable. It is only if you insist, with Graham, that all films must meet the same standards that we have to choose between *The Most* and *Lonely Boy*. To say you like both is not to admit to a collapse of critical judgment, but to suggest that critical ideas may need broadening.

Rouch began as an ethnographer and fell into the cinema. He has always had to contend with the effect that his shooting is having on his subjects — in *Moi, Un Noir* “Edward G. Robinson” went into prison, in *Chronique d'un Eté* the Renault worker *does* lose his job. But if this is irresponsibility, as Graham suggests, it is irresponsibility of a very special kind. Rouch is not a callous observer. He is no more indifferent than he is detached. It is possibly his lack of detachment that flaws his films, but it also gives them much of their excitement. I think Graham completely misreads his intentions in *Chronique* and is deaf to Rouch’s own protestations of failure. All *cinéma-vérité* worth the name reveals its conventions to its audience. Thus it is in character for Leacock and Shuker to introduce *Nehru* with an explanation of their methods—what they shouldn’t do is re-print shots (*Nehru* climbing on to a platform; Paul Crump’s warden walking down the prison corridor to test the electrocution equipment—although this last was Drew’s doing). Rouch may not be making a “film” in *Chronique*, but definitions never stopped something as dynamic as the cinema from moving on. Rouch makes his methods elaborately clear, and puts us in a perfect position to judge. So also, I would have thought, does Ruspoli in *Regards sur la Folie*. Graham suggested in correspondence that I must have had definite views about madness before seeing Ruspoli’s film and that this is why I find the film richly informative and suggestive. I do not think the weeks spent as a nurse in a Glasgow asylum told me very much but in any case Ruspoli does *not* leave us totally at sea. First with one style

(interview) then another (reportage, witness) we get a picture of the life the inmates of the hospital lead. The experience for an audience is emotional rather than intellectual, but it is certainly not totally vague and indeterminate. In *Les Inconnus de la Terre* (a better film), Ruspoli talks with farmers who don’t want to move off the land and go into the city—and from time to time moves his camera far enough away so that we see the recordist sitting with his gear across from the men in the fields. There is no reason for this, except to remind us that we are, in part, watching a record—that Ruspoli’s film, interpretative in part, is also rooted in the fact of these peoples’ lives.

But where Graham is totally unsympathetic to a new mood in the cinema is with Jean Herman’s brilliant *Chemin de la Mauvaise Route* (formerly called *Bon Pour La Vie Civile*). Here the film-maker is found guilty of mixing his styles—of recording lengthy interviews and then presenting them out of continuity, of interpreting his interviews with iconographic material and reportage; he also stages some scenes with his two principals and re-enacts others. This might be called “using the resources of the cinema”—it is also very easy to follow (apart from the alarming rapidity of some of the cutting) because it declares itself as it goes along—nothing is hidden, or faked. In the end, I suppose, we must count heads—Graham’s sympathy is smothered, mine is not. What I see as a series of devices to render coherent something which came out in a garbled, inarticulate way, Graham sees as marionetting. For in fact the more the young gypsy and his mistress appear like the figures they emulate the more I sympathize with them—because Herman has also taken the precaution to make us like them, not in the first place, but gradually as the film progresses. It is so obviously a document about these two people that this fact holds together the other threads Herman develops. Marker does it brilliantly in *Le Joli Mai* too, but Herman’s film stands as a

[continued on page 40]

tions, is not practicable in *cinéma-vérité*, as long as one is to be true to *cinéma-vérité's* basic assumptions of what is truth.

What seems to have happened is that important technological advances in film-making have become, for some, a magic key to the truth of the world. All of the nonsense about the film-maker, armed with camera and recorder, being able to exercise a passive "Christ-like vision" and find the real nature of the world appears to be a suitably elaborate rationale for the fact that some of the films made in this style cannot do justice to their subjects. Objectivity, in film, remains as big a myth as it ever was. An enormously promising way of treating certain kinds of subjects, i.e., those with strong internal structure, in which optimal spontaneity can reveal meaning hitherto inaccessible, is well on its way to becoming a mystique of technological existentialism, with appropriate overtones of Zen nonpreconception.

But we cannot assume as c-v seems to, that there is a universal or absolute truth about objects and events—in short, that there is a real nitty-gritty—and thus we must face up the fact that, to paraphrase Euclid on mathematics, there is no royal road to the real nitty-gritty.

YOUNG ON CINÉMA-VÉRITÉ (CONT'D)

fascinating prototype for a possible series of films which an American film-maker might do well to consider, if, and this is an important reservation, he can ever hope to get the confidence of his subjects as Herman clearly did here.

The Maysles brothers, Albert and David, are a special case. They consider themselves the purists of the movement—in *Showman* (about distributor-producer Joe Levine) and *The Beatles* they attempt to present their subjects completely without bias. As for the first, I have been told (in Hollywood) that the film is too critical of the "industry" and of Levine, and (in New York) that the film is a whitewash of the industry and Levine. I suppose, then, that the Maysles succeeded. Those who don't like *Showman* say they learn no more when it is

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over than after ten minutes—that it stays on the surface. The same would be said of *The Beatles*. The Maysles think that they should not interfere in shooting, that they should never set things up—the sequence in *Showman* with Susskind arguing at Levine in a Boston radio station just happened—for to do so would break the deal with their subject and, equally important, upset their own equilibrium as observers.

None of the film-makers discussed above would agree that he has been making superficial films. I am not even convinced this is the crucial point. An American philosopher called Mrs. Ladd Franklin once said she was surprised she rarely met another solipsist. The idealist critics should not run away when they meet an empirical film-maker. He is neither obscene nor dangerous. He is merely exploring a part of the cinema—the part Kracauer claimed (falsely) is the whole.